

Empowering Women through Food Processing Home Based Enterprises: A study in Sonitpur District of Assam

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ABSTRACT

The food processing sector is poised for enormous growth and already contributes about 12.7 percent of the country's GDP and provides nearly 60 percent of all job opportunities by directly employing around 1.6 million workers. The industry is the 5th largest sector in the country in terms of production, consumption, export and growth. The growth of Indian food processing was USD 91 billion in 2017 and it is growing at the rate of 13 percent per annum. By 2024, it is expected to touch USD 223.7 billion. Today, India is largest producer of milk in the world for 105 million tons per annum and second largest producer of fruits and vegetables next to China on account of 150 million per annum. Economic development of a nation can be achieved only if all human resources are being fully utilized at optimum level. Women constitute about half of the population in most of the nations and therefore it is not possible to attain fullest development with one part of the available human resource of any nation. According to the Census of India 2011, women constitute nearly 50 percent of population, perform two-thirds of the work and produce 50 percent of food commodities of our country. But they earn one-thirds of remuneration and own only 10 percent of property or wealth of the country and are still dominated by male in the society. It is generally speaking that one can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women. The status of the women is based on their empowerment. Economic empowerment increases women's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development, decision making and market information. Most of the women are associated with home based enterprises due to the ability of a home based enterprise is to attract young women/mothers to work with the family and create a new concept of entrepreneurs, 'mompreneurs'. The enterprise enables them to keep up their professional, intellectual or artistic interest and earn income for the family without compromising the needs of the family. A home based enterprise is a modern form of cottage industry with new definition. Only difference of cottage industries and home-based enterprises is that the location of cottage industries is restricted in villages whereas the home-based enterprises are also located in urban and semi-urban areas. Women generally prefer to engage in food processing home based enterprises in the state due to availability of resources. Sonitpur district

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of Assam is rich in horticultural crops like, Pineapple, Banana, Orange, Mango, etc. The World Bank project APART has been selecting Sonitpur district under 16 selected districts of Assam for developing agro-based industries in the state on Feb. 2016. In this regard, a study was conducted in Sonitpur District of Assam by selecting 50 samples of women food processing home based enterprises by applying snowball sampling method from the different parts of the district.

Key words: Food Processing, Women Empowerment, Home Based Enterprise.

INTRODUCTION

“Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world.”

– **Hillary Clinton**

The food processing industry is an important industry in India which has an interlink between agricultural products and industries. This industry is the second fastest growing industry in world by following the tourism industry. The food processing sector is poised for enormous growth and already contributes about 12.7 percent of the country's GDP and provides nearly 60 percent of all job opportunities by directly employing around 1.6 million workers. The industry is the 5th largest sector in the country in terms of production, consumption, export and growth. The growth of Indian food processing was USD 91 billion in 2017 and it is growing at the rate of 13 percent per annum. By 2024, it is expected to touch USD 223.7 billion. The availability of raw materials, changing lifestyles and relaxation in regulatory policies is fuelling the growth of this industry. In Assam there are tremendous opportunities for developing food processing industries. To give a major boost to the food processing sector by adding value and reducing wastage and loss at each stage of the supply chain, the Ministry of Food Processing Industries established a mega food park, “North East Mega Food Park” at Nathkuchi Village near the Tihu town ship of Nalbari District in Assam on 28 May 2015. Moreover, six Primary Processing Centres (PPCs) are also proposed to be set up in the region at Nagaon, Badarpur,

Tinsukia, Barapani, Krishnai and Kajalgaon which will provide facilities for primary processing and storage near the farms. Besides that, the World Bank came forward to invest 200 billion US dollars in the project, ‘Assam Project on Agri-business and Rural Transformation’ (APART) on Feb 2016. The women entrepreneurs were closely associated with the food processing industries due to their inherent interest and custom of cooking. Women participation in the development work is important from the point of their empowerment. Empowerment generally refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of women by eliminating gender inequality. Women’s economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development and pro-poor growth of the society. Economic empowerment is the capacity of women to participate in development activities. It recognizes the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth (Eyben *et al.*, 2008). It increases women’s access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development, decision making and market information.

Economic development of a nation can be achieved only if all human resources are being fully utilized at optimum level. This implies that both men and women must participate to achieve that goal. Women constitute about half of the population in most of the nations and therefore it is not possible to attain fullest devel-

opment with one part of the available human resource of any nation. According to the Census of India 2011, women constitute nearly 50 percent of population, perform two-thirds of the work and produce 50 percent of food commodities of our country. But they earn one-thirds of remuneration and own only 10 percent of property or wealth of the country and are still dominated by male in the society. According to a report by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), "Despite evidence that women's loan repayment rates are higher than men's, women still face more difficulties in obtaining credit," often due to discriminatory attitudes of banks and informal lending groups (UNIDO, 1995b). As per the Gender development Indicators, India ranked 108th in the world. A nation can be built when its women are given ample opportunities to develop themselves. It is generally speaking that one tells the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women. Women entrepreneurship comes to be the best alternative for women empowerment due to lack of guaranteed employment. It provides women to take initiative, organize and operate a business or industry and to take various decisions independently and also provide employment opportunities to others. It is a catalytic process by which resources can be mobilized and put them into effective use. Development of women develops the family, society and hence the nation. Women in India are still home bound and feel insecure in outside development activities, especially in rural India. Today, India is the largest producer of milk in the world for 105 million tons per annum and second largest producer of fruits and vegetables next to China on account of 150 million per annum. But the development of food processing industries is far behind the expectation. Though the topography of Assam is climatically suitable for the development of horticulture, but there are a few num-

bers of units for processing fruits, vegetables and other horticulture products. The growth of the food processing industries is not at all satisfactory in the state.

In the above context, the topic entitled, "Empowering women through Food Processing Home Based Enterprises: A study in Sonitpur District of Assam" has been selected for the study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted on food processing home based enterprises of Sonitpur district of Assam with following objectives:

To study socio-economic status of women running food processing home based enterprises in the district;

To study the attitude of family and society towards women engaged in food processing home based enterprises;

To examine the employment opportunities offered by the food processing units.

To identify the problems faced by the enterprises in case of finance, production and marketing.

The study is empirical in nature and based on primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected through sample survey. The primary data were obtained by applying both schedules and questionnaire methods from the respondents. Schedules were filled up by the researcher to observe the depth of the study. Parameters like social status, educational qualification, training etc of the owners and earning, production, marketing etc of the enterprises are included in the schedules.

The secondary data were collected from Books, Research Papers, Articles in the Net & Newspapers, E- Journals and official websites of various agencies to establish the authenticity of the study.

Coverage: The study covered entire Sonitpur district of Assam, which was sub-divided into 5 study zones viz. Tezpur, Dhekiajuli, Rangapara, Biswanath Charali and Gohpur.

Period of the study: The study was conducted for the period of June 2017 to Dec. 2017.

Sampling Method: The non-probability Snowball Sampling method was used in collecting primary data for the study, since sampling frame was not available.

Sample Size: Total number of 50 women food processing units was selected as sample size for the study, which includes all types of food processing enterprises run by women from different locations of the district.

Data Interpretation & Analysis: The collected data were classified, interpreted and analyzed by using various statistical tools and computer software like MS

Excel, SPSS 16.0.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary data of the study revealed that, out of 50 samples of women food processing enterprises in the district, majority of these enterprises were established at home i.e. 48 units (96 percent).

From the analysis of primary data, it was found that the majority of women engaged in food processing home based enterprises were married (68 percent), middle age i.e. 21-40 years (62 percent) with minimum educational qualification (24 percent under matriculation, 48 percent matriculate, 20 percent HS passed & only 8 percent graduate) and their annual average earning was Rs. 62,500 (average monthly earning Rs. 5,600).

Out of the 50 women food processing enterprises, 16 percent women were belonged to

SC, 8 percent were belonged to ST, 34 percent were belonged to OBC and 42 percent were belonged to general caste.

Most of the food processing enterprises were run by Bengali women (52 percent) followed by Assamese women (34 percent) and 14 percent from other communities.

The primary survey also revealed that 86 percent women were encouraged by the family to start their enterprise, 76 percent have respect in the family for running an enterprise, 72 percent got family support to run the enterprise and 4 percent women got negative attitude from the family for running an enterprise due family burden.

The study revealed that women entrepreneurs, especially those who engaged in food processing enterprises in the district faced financial problem (56 percent) due to unequal women's property rights problems, marketing due to heavy competition (40 percent) followed by lack of self confidence (18 percent).

Regarding awareness of the government policies, 68 percent of women totally unaware of government policies and schemes, and only 30 percent got training.

Out of the 50 samples of food processing enterprises in the district, 44 units (88 percent) could provide employment opportunities to others along with self. Out of these 18 units (36 percent) food processing home based enterprises employed more than 5 workers.

The study also revealed that majority of food processing home based enterprises in the district had started without taking loan i.e. 44 enterprises (88 percent) had started with their own fund. Only 6 (12 percent) women entrepreneurs started their enterprises by taking loan and most of the enterprises (80 percent) taking loan from the Rural Banks (AGV & PG Bank).

88 percent women used traditional method in their production and packaging of

their products and only 12 percent used sophisticated modern technology in the food processing enterprises.

In the study, there were some common problems observed with the women running food processing home based enterprises in the district like lack of industrial knowledge, self under estimation, inadequate financial resources and working capital, incapable of getting external finance due to absence of tangible security and credit in the market, dependence on the middlemen for marketing, discontinuation of enterprises due to seasonal family burden etc.

Food Processing Home Based Enterprises in Sonitpur District of Assam:

The undivided Sonitpur District of Assam, before the bifurcation of Biswanath District, is located in the middle of the state covering the area of 5,204 sq. km which is 6.6 percent of the total area of the state. Sonitpur district is the second largest district of Assam after the district of Karbi Anglong according to the geographical area. There are 3 sub-divisions, 14 Development Blocks and 1,876 villages in the district. The District topography is climatically suitable for the development of horticulture. The area wise production and yield of important horticulture crops for the development

of food processing enterprises are presented in the Table 1.

A home based enterprise is a modern form of cottage & village industry with new definition. The Home-Based Enterprises (HBEs), Home-Based Business (HBB) & Household Industries (HIs) are synonymous and these types of enterprises are belonged to micro enterprises, since the heavy industries are not allowed to establish along with the home or in the residential area by the government regulations. Micro enterprises are those enterprises where total investments are not more than Rs.25 lakhs in case of manufacturing sector and not more than Rs.10 lakhs in case of service sector according to the Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises Development (MSMED) Act, 2006. Earlier (Before May 2007) these industries belonged to the cottage industries and came under the purview of 'Ministry of Small Scale Industries'. Only difference of cottage industries and home-based enterprises is that the location of cottage industries is restricted in villages whereas the home-based enterprises are also located in urban and semi-urban areas. These enterprises are based on locally available resources, which are employment potential at low cost of capital. Generally, HBEs are run by the members of the family to meet the local require-



Fig. 1. Bamboo Shoot, Amora & King Chilies Pickles

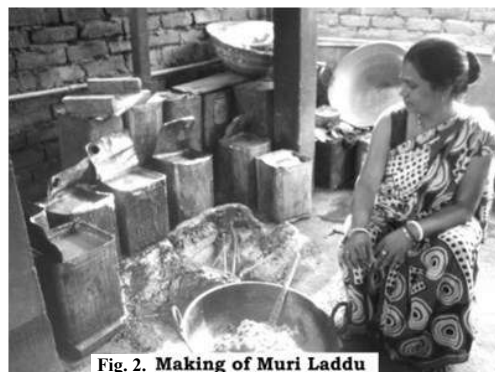


Fig. 2. Making of Muri Laddu

Table 1. Area and Production in Different Horticulture as on 31-03-2017

Name of the Horticulture Crop	Area in Hector	Production in MT	AverageYield MT
A. Fruits:			
Banana	2000	3880	0.19
Pineapple	535	8025	15
Orange	130	1300	10
Lime & Lemon	475	1650	6
Papaya	370	4810	13
Guava	220	3018	13
Litchi	505	2048	4
B. Fruits (Nut crop)			
Aeronaut	4430	3322	0.75
Coconut	1325	8944	7
C. Spice			
Black pepper	125	200	1
Ginger	1450	8700	6
Turmeric	550	4124	7
Coriander	1035	2070	7
Chilies	690	4140	8
Garlic	136	629	5
Onion	300	1365	3
D. Ravi Vegetable			
Potato	6100	54,910	9
Tomato	2736	40040	15
Brinjal	2200	33600	18
Cabbage	4731	10965	15
Curly flower	2321	23210	10
E. Kharif Vegetable			
Ladies Fingers (Bhendi)	663	9950	15
Ridge gourd	1330	13500	10
Cucumber	495	2490	4
Pumpkin	72	720	10
Bitter gourd	392	3920	10
Pointed gourd	570	3060	5

Sources: District Agriculture Office, Sonitpur, Tezpur

ments. Census definition of 'Household Industry' (Home-based Enterprise) provides that as an industry conducted by the head of the household himself/herself and/or by the members of the household at home or within the village in rural areas, and only within the precincts (boundaries) of the house where the household is in urban areas. Home-based enterprises cover artisans, skilled craftsmen and technicians who can work in their own houses if their work requires less than 300 square feet space. Home-based enterprises are sustainable in nature where power and fuel consuming plant and machineries are hardly used.

HBEs greatly create the employment opportunities for low-income households especially for women who are very much low ebb in the society. Traditionally, women are home-bound in our country and they are more secure and safe to run a business from the home. The HBEs provide a great opportunity to the women to earn for their family from the home itself. Since it provides a flexible routine work for women, women can look after their children and can perform other day to day house hold activities by managing the enterprise. The ability of a home based enterprise is to attract young women/mothers to work with the family and create a

new concept of entrepreneurs, 'mompreneurs'. The enterprise enables them to keep up their professional, intellectual or artistic interest and earn income for the family without compromising the needs of the family. Most of the food processing home based enterprises in the district run by the women due to some inherent advantages. Different types of locally available raw-materials help to boost food processing home based enterprises in the district. Pickle from fruits, bamboo shoot, King Chilies (*Bhoot Jalakia*) and vegetables, juice, jams, 'Behuwai' / 'Kharoli' (mustard seeds), masalas, traditional cake (*Laddu & Pitah*), *chira & muri laddu* etc. are very famous in Assam and near-lying states (Figure 1 & 3). King Chilies and Litchi of Tezpur in the district are world famous. Now a day the '*Laddu & Pitha*' (typical Assamese cake) become very popular and demandable items. These items are not only demanded in the seasonal festival but also for different types of occasions like meeting, conference, seminar, work-shop, marriage party etc. *Muri Laddu & Chira Laddu* of the district has a great demand in local market as well as in the neighbouring state like Arunachal Pradesh (Figure 2).

Government policies toward development of food processing industries:

The government of India instituted various policies to boost the development of food processing industries in Assam, some of key policies and schemes are enumerated below:

Scheme for technology upgradation, establishment and modernization of food processing industries: The scheme is initiative by the Central Ministry of Food Processing Industries. The food processing industry in India was traditionally a labour intensive sector without using modern technology and now the government is trying to modernize it. The scheme covers setting up technology up-gradation/modernization/establishment of food processing industries in fruits and vegetables, milk prod-

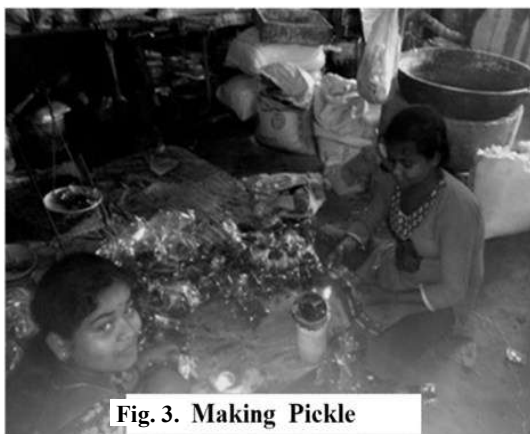


Fig. 3. Making Pickle

ucts, coconut, mushroom etc and also provided financial assistance.

North East Mega Food Park: The Ministry of Food Processing Industries established a mega food park, “North East Mega Food Park” at Nathkuchi Village near the Tihu town ship of Nalbari District in Assam on 28 May 2015. The Mega Food Park is an inclusive concept which is aimed at establishing direct linkages from the farm to processing and to the consumer markets, through a network of Collection Centres (CC), Primary Processing Centres (PPC) and Central Processing Centre (CPC). The scheme was launched to help to achieve the Vision 2015 of the Ministry of Food Processing Industries, which aims at increasing the processing of perishables from the current 6% to 20%, value addition from the current 20% to 35% and at increasing India’s share in global food trade from the current 1.5% to 3%. The primary objective of the scheme is to provide adequate infrastructure for food processing along the value chain from the farm to the Market. It includes creation of infrastructure near the farms, transportation, logistics and centralized processing centres. The main feature of the scheme is a cluster based approach. The scheme aims at facilitating the establishment of a strong food processing industry backed by an efficient supply chain, which will include collection centres, primary processing centres and cold chain infrastructure. The food processing units would be located at a central processing centre. It is expected that each mega food park would have about 30 – 35 food processing units with collective investment of about 250 crores that would eventually lead to a annual turnover of 400 – 500 crores and generate employment (Direct and Indirect) for about 30,000 people. The scheme provides for a grant of 50% (75% for the NE region) of the capital

cost excluding land cost, subject to a ceiling of Rupees Fifty Crores.’

APART: The World Bank invested 200 billion US dollars in the project, ‘Assam Project on Agri-business and Rural Transformation’ (APART) on Feb 2016. The proposed Project aims to 'increase value added and improve resilience in the production and processing of selected agriculture commodities, focusing on small farmers and agro-entrepreneurs in targeted districts'. The project inter alia would give thrust on enhancing agglomeration of producers to improve economies of scale in producing, processing and marketing. The project will support agriculture and livestock productivity through essential technology transfer in production and improved post-harvest and market operations, and explore and pilot possible financing modalities to support entrepreneurship and agri-business. APART will leverage the natural resource advantages of State of Assam as well as improve the investment climate and in particular, focus will be on processed food, food safety, agribusiness, logistics and infrastructure, MSME finance, and insurance. Project beneficiaries will include farmers and entrepreneurs especially in the MSME segment. Total 16 districts of Assam, including Sonitpur District had been selected for the project out of the total districts of Assam.

Suggestions for the Growth of Women Food Processing Enterprises in the State:

The following measures may be adopted to solve the problem faced by the women food processing enterprises in Assam.

Training Facilities: Skills development trainings like managerial, technical and marketing are essential for the development of women food processing home based

enterprises to create self confidence. Training should be provided near to the location of the farms and daily stipend should be given, because most of the women depend on their daily income to run the family.

Awareness programmes: Most of the women of this sector in Assam are totally unaware of govt. scheme and policies and they also hesitated to come forward. Therefore, awareness programmes of the schemes and policies and their benefits become inevitable part of implementing these policies.

Special Finance cells: Special finance cells may be opened at different location to cater various financial services at the local level that owners get easy financial supports and services at their door steps. These special cells may provide finance to women entrepreneurs at low and concessional rates of interest and on easy repayment facilities. "Material/machinery as loans" are more effective than "Cash as loans". These finance cells may be managed by women officers and clerks to create friendlier atmosphere.

Marketing Co-operatives: Marketing co-operatives should be established to encourage and to assist women entrepreneurs. These marketing cooperatives will help the women entrepreneurs to sell their products on remunerative prices. This will help in eliminating the problem of middlemen. Government should give preference in purchasing of HBEs products while purchasing government's requirements.

Introduce Modern Technology: Most of the food processing units could not fulfill the market demand of their product due traditional and outdated technology used in production and packaging their product. Government may supply modern sophis-

ticated equipments like mixture, grinder, oven, dryer, bottling and packing machinery to these enterprises at concessional rate through their agencies..

Change of Social Attitude: It is necessary to change negative social attitude towards women. Unless the social attitudes are made positive, the development and progress cannot be attained by the women entrepreneurs. Women have the potentiality and will power to establish and manage enterprises of their own but they needs only encouragement and support from the family and society as well as from the government.

Equal Property Right: Equal share in the parental property to access to private capital and create self confidence to take risk of liabilities becomes necessity. It will also create tangible securities for getting financial assistances from the banks and market.

CONCLUSION

The topography of Sonitpur district of Assam is climatically suitable for the development of horticulture. Major fruits grown in the District include Pineapple, Banana, Orange, Lime, Papaya, Mango and other miscellaneous fruits. During last few years the farmers are also well acquainted with many crops like Broccoli, Capsicum etc. There are tremendous scopes for developing Jam, Jelly, Pickles, and Traditional Biscuits manufacturing units in the district. The Ministry of Food Processing Industries recently initiated a number of schemes to promote food processing enterprises in the state in general and the district in particular. It is also clear that to achieve complete economic development, both the human resources, viz men and women, of the nation should be properly utilized. Women's empowerment requires more and better jobs, a secure business climate that supports them to start and run an enterprise, and needs easily as-

sessable financial services to fulfill their financial needs. Securing women's land rights has a direct impact on their financial capability. 'United Nations Development Programme' also initiated women's economic empowerment by advocating implementation of women's legal rights to property and to participate in decision-making form. On the other hand, an enterprise which can be started without investing establishment capital from the home itself, which may provide more security and flexibility in the daily routine of an Indian typical woman, is the home based enterprise. Therefore it can be concluded that food processing home based enterprises are the most possible means for empowering women in the state.

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